

# Roots to Branches: Zen Blossoms in Europe

## BEGINNINGS IN SPAIN: THE KWAN UM SCHOOL IN EUROPE

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It was 1969 when I bought a copy of *Desolation Angels* by Jack Kerouac. In those years, when I was still a high school student, the book made a great impact on my adolescent mind.

I wanted to read more books by Jack Kerouac, but no others had been published in Spain. Above all I longed to read *On the Road*. A few months later, after I had given up on finding it, by chance I entered a small bookstore. I noticed that in addition to the books on the display tables, many were also arranged on shelves in alphabetical order. I looked under *K* and I almost jumped out of my skin when I found three books by Jack Kerouac, published by a company in Argentina—*On the Road*, *Dharma Bums* and *Lonesome Traveler*—on which I invested nearly all my savings. I can say that *Dharma Bums* was the book that introduced me to Buddhism.

Shortly after that, I approached the same bookstore, after accumulating a little more money, and I bought the three volumes of *Essays in Zen Buddhism* by D. T. Suzuki. Suzuki's translations of Buddhist texts captivated me, especially the fragments from Master Rinzai's sayings.

In a way, Kerouac's books and the few books that I read about Buddhism influenced me to major in philosophy. After reading Kerouac, I felt a great affinity for the hippies and psychedelia, which, perhaps in an intuitive and somehow confusing way, I managed to connect with Zen Buddhism.

In 1972 I started to spend time in another small book-

store, and one day when I was browsing around I found the book that would change my life radically. It was called *Entretiens de Lin-Tsi*. It was a French translation of the sayings of Zen Master Lin Chi. The book fascinated me, and I cannot even say that I understood it (though, as Zen Master Seung Sahn later clarified to me, Zen is not about understanding). For me it was a book that would be just as interesting and enigmatic in a thousand years as it was in the ninth century.

Eventually I completed my degree in philosophy, but I decided Zen was more interesting. After reading Lin Chi I realized that to understand—or better, to attain—Zen I needed the guidance of a true Zen master. Were there still authentic Zen masters? What chance had a young Spaniard with meager means of studying with a Zen master? I made a plan: I decided to write to a Japanese Zen master then living in Paris. I was ready to go to the

French capital to study with him.

Meanwhile, while visiting yet another bookstore, by chance I came across a book in English titled *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha: The Teachings of Zen Master Seung Sahn*. It was a delightful book in which a contemporary Korean Zen master spoke about Zen in way that resonated with me in the same way as Zen Master Lin Chi. It was as if in a magic way there was an unbroken stream from past to present, which had not disappeared after several centuries. I decided to write also to Zen Master Seung Sahn, who was then in the United States, and ask him for advice on the practice of Zen.

Months passed and I received a reply from the Zen master in Paris. I was totally disappointed: it was a





cold, impersonal letter with an unattractive brochure showing some of the activities they did in France. And, while awaiting a reply from Zen Master Seung Sahn, I found that I had sent my letter to a totally wrong address, so I resigned myself to not receiving a response.

So it was with great surprise that I eventually received a letter from the Providence Zen Center, where Zen Master Seung Sahn lived at the time. In his own handwriting he described with precision and enthusiasm everything that, in my clumsy English, I had tried to express in my letter. He gave me valuable advice on how to practice true Zen. I also began to receive the regular newsletters from the Providence Zen Center. One of these newsletters mentioned a guy from Majorca (Joan Insa) who was studying art in New York and was also a student of Zen Master Seung Sahn. And he was planning to return to Spain. The article also gave his address in Majorca, so I wrote him. He was amazed that someone in our country knew about Zen Master Seung Sahn. We corresponded for a while and he told me that, if we worked together, we could invite Zen Master Seung Sahn to lead a retreat in Majorca.

Zen Master Seung Sahn's visits to Europe started mainly because of Zen Master Wu Bong's Polish background, and also because of Joan Insa, his first Spanish student. In the beginning nobody knew the school or this style of practice. The Japanese style was more well known, mostly because of the Zen master in France. Following to Zen Master Seung Sahn's visits to different places in Europe, the first groups of practitioners gradually began to appear.

In the spring of 1981, Zen Master Seung Sahn led his first retreat in Spain, at a Catholic monastery in Majorca that was rented for the occasion. About twenty people attended. Of course, there I was.

It was a strong, traditional-style retreat. The practice was hard, but the presence of Zen Master Seung Sahn—and his interviews and his lectures—was unforgettable. In this retreat I became friends with Enric Mus, a Majorcan who had come to sit the retreat. It turns out he worked as a forest ranger, living in a hermitage in the mountains, preventing forest fires just like Jack Kerouac in *Desolation Angels*!

A year later Enric wrote to me to tell me he was living in a hippie commune, the Ahaba Community, out in the country, and they wanted to invite Zen Master Seung Sahn. That year we did two retreats, one in Majorca and another one in Catalonia.

The Ahaba Community, in Gerona, was located in an isolated valley and had no electricity. The water had to be pumped up from a nearby river. Broadly speaking, the conditions were pretty tough, but the retreat in Ahaba was a great success, attended by more than sixty people. Enric and I started to think about opening a Zen center affiliated with the Kwan Um School

in Barcelona.

Also, one night during this retreat, while having a well-deserved cup of tea after a hard day of long hours of sitting meditation, talking about some of my recent readings, which were almost always in English or French, we agreed that it was a pity that these books were not published in our country. Suddenly we got a crazy idea to publish them ourselves, and so we founded a publishing house specializing in Zen, meditation and other topics that excited us. Thus was born La Liebre de Marzo, a small publishing company where we publish Spanish translations of the books we love, including *Tirando cenizas sobre el buda* and *La brújula del Zen*, both by Zen Master Seung Sahn, *La barrera sin puerta* (the Mumonkan), *Las enseñanzas del Maestro Zen Lin-Chi*, and many others.

Zen Master Seung Sahn visited Spain six times while he was touring Europe. Often he was accompanied by wonderful students, who would later become wonderful teachers themselves, including Zen Masters Su Bong, Dae Bong, Dae Kwang, and Bon Yeon, as well as Mu Sang Sunim. I was appointed as his translator, and when I protested that my English was very bad Zen Master Seung Sahn replied: "Wait to hear mine!" And when once we did find a good translator for a dharma talk, a philosophy professor who used to live in the United States, Zen Master Seung Sahn complained at the end. He had perceived that this man tended to use too many flowery words and didn't translate well his direct style, so he confessed he preferred me as his translator: "I want you here to be my tongue and my ears, because you understand the teachings better, that they are not something to decorate with beautiful words." Anyway, people keep complaining about not passing kong-ans because of my bad translations, but it's not true!

After the third year, Zen Master Seung Sahn was accompanied by a colleague, whose charisma, he may have hoped, would attract more practitioners. While this worked initially, it soon became clear that their teaching directions were different, and there was a traumatic split in the sangha. Barcelona Zen Center (Bori Centro Zen) disappeared, and Majorca Zen Center almost disappeared. For some years I attempted to reopen a Zen center in Barcelona, but it was very difficult. Besides, at that time Zen Master Seung Sahn had stopped coming to Spain. Actually, after the rift, many people didn't want to hear anything more of Korean Zen, as they felt betrayed by what had happened. Also, as Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, "in Spain, too-good situation." Not many people feel compelled to do hard training.

Slowly, with lots of patience and great effort, and helped by my wife, Rosanna, and later by my daughter, Barbara, we finally reopened the Barcelona Zen Center. But instead



of having as many as 60 people at Yong Maeng Jong Jins, as in the beginnings with Zen Master Seung Sahn, now retreats had three or four people. We started by doing one Yong Maeng Jong Jin a month. Gradually we had a bigger sangha and we were able to invite teachers to lead some of the retreats, from Zen Master Wu Bong to Zen Master Bon Yo, and our keen-eyed guiding teacher Zen Master Bon Shim, who nowadays visits us two or three times a year. Some students started attending retreats and Kyol Ches in several temples in Paris, Germany, Poland, America, Korea, and so on, and their practice became stronger.

Currently, Barcelona has a core group of about twenty practitioners. We have daily practice in Barcelona and a monthly Yong Maeng Jong Jin in our center in Torredembarra, a village 100 kilometers from the city, near the beach.

The story of the Kwan Um School in Spain has been quite complicated: a strong start with visits by Zen Master Seung Sahn, then it almost disappeared. But thanks to a small group of students we could gradually rebuild our Zen center again.

Despite all the problems, it has been a fun and exciting time. Memories of the retreats in Ahaba will remain in the minds of all who participated. Nobody can forget the common bathrooms—men and women showering together, to the astonishment of the monks who accompanied Zen Master Seung Sahn!

The story of the Barcelona Zen Center is proof that in spite of all the trials and tribulations, so long as a small group of people wants to practice seriously, they can rebuild their center from scratch. More important than quantity is the quality of practice, and the intention. Zen centers can exist only with a good direction and a deep sense of practice. We don't know the future of the Barcelona Zen Center or the Kwan Um School in Spain, but the important thing is to keep working, moment to moment, in the right direction.

## FINDING THE WAY BACK HOME

*Zen Master Bon Shim*



For as long as I can remember, I've been looking for some guidance, something that could help me to understand life, my self and this scary world. Living in a Catholic family, I had only one choice, so I

used to go to church almost every day to pray for some help. Finally, a friend of mine, whom I met accidentally and who knew that I was looking desperately for answers to my existential questions, told me that a great

Korean Zen master was coming to Krakow in two weeks, so I should come to the airport to greet him. I was very excited and couldn't wait, imagining what a great Zen master would look like. When the day finally came, I went to the airport to wait for him an hour before his arrival, holding a bunch of flowers. The Zen master appeared with eight American students, and at first I was disappointed because he looked ordinary, like any other Korean person. Only later, when we went to my friend's house and he started talking, did I know I had just met my teacher.

I can't describe how happy and grateful I felt: just like finding the way back home after being lost for a long, long time. We had our first Yong Maeng Jong Jin with interviews, and a precepts ceremony, with the precepts burn done with little wax strings instead of the incense sticks that we use nowadays. From that time on Zen Master Seung Sahn used to come every year, always so powerful, laughing a lot and always taking care of people. Whoever came and needed any answers from him, or just a little attention, he was there for them. His great compassion was the most striking thing about him, and there were thousands of situations I observed during all those years when I was so amazed by his unconditioned love.

Foremost was that he came to our country, which was still communist at the time. That time was very hard for Poland, the last years of communism, with martial law and no food in the shops, and so Zen Master Seung Sahn's visits were extremely important for Polish people. He gave us hope and helped us to see things from a different perspective. The path to liberation had a deep meaning for us, living in an oppressed country, so our sangha grew quickly. We had so many people for Yong Maeng Jong Jin and kido retreats that we could hardly manage. Every time he arrived there was a public dharma talk. Once six hundred people attended his talk. He also used to travel a lot, and any time students invited him he didn't hesitate, but just went there, gave a talk and a new group appeared.

Personally, I also benefited greatly from him on many levels. He would stay at my place whenever he came to Poland. It was inspiring to see him getting up at three o'clock every morning. My baby used to wake up around this time. When the baby was three months old it cried a lot. When Zen Master Seung Sahn noticed it, he did a beautiful ceremony for the baby. Every time he came, he looked at my little boy with his keen eyes. And when my older son was a teenager he had many teenage problems, so once Zen Master Seung Sahn had a serious talk with him. I've never known what this talk was about, but since then my son has been getting up at 5 a.m. for morning practice.

Our great teacher saved many lives. We will always miss him.